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4701 WILLARD AVENUE, CHEVY CHASE, MARYLAND 20815 656-4068

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PROGRAM All Things Considered

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SUBJECT Denouncing the Soviet Union

TOM JELTON: So far, the United States has taken the lead in denouncing the Soviet Union for its attack on the Korean airliner....

In their daily statements on the incident, Soviet officials have come a bit closer to accepting responsibility for shooting down the Korean airliner. In a statement carried over official media yesterday, the head of the Soviet Air Defense Command called the crash of Flight 7 an unprecedented accident and suggested that the Soviet pilot following the Korean airliner might have mistaken it for a U.S. spy plane. Colonel General Simyon Romanov stopped short, however, of admitting that Soviet pilots actually destroyed the Korean aircraft, and he said that the U.S. Government must take some of the responsibility for the loss of life because it had deliberately sent the airliner into Soviet airspace in order to spy on Soviet defenses.

Shortly after the Soviet statement, White House officials reported that a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft had in fact been near the Soviet coast shortly before the Korean airliner was shot down and that Soviet air controllers might have confused the two planes. But the aircraft were headed in opposite directions and, according to U.S. officials, they were a thousand miles apart by the time the Korean airliner went down. The officials said Soviet pilots had plenty of time to identify the Korean airliner.

George Carver was special assistant to three Directors of the Central Intelligence Agency and a coordinator of U.S. intelligence operations in Germany. He says it's absurd to hear a Soviet general speculate that a fighter pilot might have been mistaken, because under the Soviet military structure, the pilot

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would have had to describe exactly what he saw before he fired a missile.

GEORGE CARVER: Well, I think the decision to shoot it down was made at [Russian term] headquarters in Moscow or authorized. Now, there may have been a recommendation from the regional command at Vladivostok to shoot it down. But I do not think that the action would have been taken without at least the approval from [Russian term] in Moscow, and if indeed it wasn't Moscow itself that gave the order in the first place.

JELTON: And what would the role of Colonel General Romanov been in that decision?

CARVER: He's the commander of [Russian term]. He would have been -- had to have been the person who approved shooting it down, if not giving the order to have it shot down.

JELTON: The U.S. reconnaissance plane apparently had sophisticated equipment on board for monitoring communications and radar activity. But a Pentagon spokesman would not comment on whether the plane could have detected Soviet reactions to the Korean plane.